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**Reflections on
Social Policy in Africa**

With
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**Des réflexions sur
la politique sociale en Afrique**

Avec
Jimi Adesina

Editorial

Over the last three decades or so, a number of scholars operating under the auspices of CODESRIA, and later UNRISD, have dedicated their energies and time to rescuing social policy in Africa from external policy manipulation and intellectual assault. The assault manifested itself in the form of reductionist neoliberal approaches that questioned the role of state in development generally and the idea and practice of social policy in particular. The external assault reduced the discourse on development privileging

market forces as the key to allocation of public goods. In this scenario, the broad meaning and context of social policy in a developmet context was emptied and reduced to a mere 'social protection' function.

The attack on social policy in the African context persist to date. This is especially the case as neoclassical economic thinking prevails and its attempt to find explanations for the failed neo-liberal project avoids the idea of transformative social policy. The brutal inequalities that neo-liberalism has engendered, made worse in recent times by the pandemic, and deepening marginalisation of some constituencies of society are all factors that urge for a notion of social policy that is developmental in orientation. And this is where the story of poverty-eradication fits in. In the context of neo-liberal reflections, once poverty was 'discovered' and became trendy, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers framework was advanced as a means of addressing poverty's debilitating effects. But this has hardly addressed the challenge of poverty. Instead, the poverty strategy framework rephrased social policy's role to that of easing the pains through the mere provision of subsides as safety nets. Governments have been coerced, cajoled or simply made to comply with this palliative framework that adopts 'solutions' that merely promise that the effects on the poor will be minimised through social assistance handouts. Shaping the debate as one between growth and equity, the proponents of the limited state, and cash assistance, seem to have won in the last few decades, especially since the emphasis on retrenching the state was given a new lease of life under the Washington Consensus.

The papers in this Bulletin are selected and summarized from the recently published CODESRIA study on *Social Policy in the African Context* (Dakar, 2021) edited by Jimi O. Adesina. The papers were first presented and discussed at the conference in Pretoria, in 2017, on Social Policy in Africa jointly organized by CODESRIA, the SARChI Chair in Social Policy at the University of South Africa (Unisa) and UNRISD. Out of the fourteen chapters published in the book, six are summarized in this Bulletin to make this work easily accessible to the academic and policy community, including civil society actors wishing to engage with these ideas.

CODESRIA's former Executive Secretary, the late Thandika Mkandawire gave a key note address at that conference together with Tade Aina. Both Thandika and Tade Aina pioneered work around social policy in Africa, and their intellectual reflections on the issues have been central to sustaining debates on social policy in the continent. The passing on of Thandika may have undermined the speed with which the rescue mission, referred to above, is being conducted. But it certainly has not stopped the desire and conviction to document the historic relevance and undeniable importance of social policy in development. Through his illustrious intellectual career, Thandika brought conceptual clarity to debates on social policy. The strength of his methodological grounding and the historical depth of his understanding of socioeconomic processes globally and in Africa left a rich but unfinished research agenda.

The unfinished research agenda revolves around the notion of transformative social policy. It is built around a set of assumptions that depart radically from the neoliberal anchors around which the dominant mainstream practice and thinking on social policy have been organised. At its core, and as Jayati Ghosh recently reminded us at the third edition of the Social Policy in Africa Conference, Thandika understood social policy to be essentially economic policy and he demonstrated the strength of framing social policy in terms of development, but also insisted that development is hollow if it is not imbued with a deeply democratic spirit. As the interventions here show, periodic handouts in the forms of cash transfers do not make social policy. Rather, social protection is treated as a neoliberal decoy aimed at diverting social policy off its transformative content and shifting it towards an ahistorical framework and anti-development agenda.

The articles in this Bulletin, if read together, suggest the need to avoid the criminalization of social policy in neoliberal societies, to borrow the title of a recent study.[1] This assertion is ably summarised in the introductory article and given greater elaboration by Katja Hujo's piece. The subsequent articles elaborate the dimensions of social policy using the conceptualisation envisioned in the transformative framework. The articles focus on the intersections of social policy with issues of gender and health, land, the dynamics in household food provisioning and the sustenance of communical support systems. The articles weigh the varied levels of effectiveness of whatever approach is used. The desire to ensure that the interventions not only contribute to development but also address issues of poverty, equity and marginalisation is notable in these essays. In other words, there is a general social justice ethos undergirding the vision of social policy that the contributors advance.

The terrain of justice, however, is murky, more so when the key institutions mandated to ensure justice are themselves weak, incapacitated or under attack. While there are broad global commitments to all forms of justice and the equity that social justice promises, few global institutions walk the talk of equity and justice in reality. This has worked to generate enormous doubt in global commitments for fairness, equity and justice, and this doubt has cascaded to regional and local institutions. The state in Africa has come under particular focus, and its role in policy-making in general and social policy in particular deserves more than a passing mention.

In Africa, doubts about the willingness, capacity and commitment of the state to further social justice goals have grown over the decades. This was framed as 'the national question' in the immediate decade after independence. There is enormous literature capturing intellectual debates and reflections on the nature of the state and state–society relations in Africa and the role of the state in development. These literature highlight, but does not sufficiently elaborate on the issue of policy sovereignty. In any case, the time when these intellectual refelctions took place was also a moment when policy spaces were dominated by external actors, many of whom had arrived in Africa as 'stickholders'.

During the Structural Adjustment Programmes and their various subsequent iterations, existing spaces of policy sovereignty were attacked and occupied by foreign merchants and marabouts of development. So vicious was this attack that government officials waited for a node from Washington DC and other capitals in the global North to take simple decisions on issues of national concern. In other cases, multilateral and bilateral donors discussed in advance and approved lists of key officials to occupy pertinent positions in key ministries. Christened the 'dream teams' in several countries, their presence and instruction to report directly to partners abroad confirmed the extent to which African governments had ceded policy spaces to external actors.

To date, much of the continent has not recovered the space for autonomous policy-making. To be sure, the external occupation of spaces for policy-making in Africa has in some cases been entreached. This therefore raises the issue of policy sovereignty as key to reflections on policy in general and social policy in particular. At the end of the day, the main issue at the heart of policy processes in Africa remains that of creating spaces for sovereign policy-making and linking them to similar experiences in the global South, creating a South–South framework for social policy thought and intervention. It is indeed our aim in CODESRIA that a major initiative be mounted to discuss policy processes in Africa with the aim of seeking to grow, within the continent, spaces of policy sovereignty. It is time to take forward the agenda for transformative social policy in Africa because it will also contribute to securing spaces for policy sovereignity.

Note

1. Kiely Elizabeth and Swirak Katharina, 2021, *The Criminalisation of Social Policy in Neoliberal Societies,* Bristol University Press.

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